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ABSTRACT

This outline describes the initial direction of a collaborative project involving several educators with training and experience in alternative/progressive education. Goals include: exploring and developing one or more new models for high school education, submitting articles concerning this work to appropriate publications, and implementing the model(s) in the creation of at least one school/program. This outline describes initial assumptions concerning schooling and briefly indicates one example of a set of components of a school consistent with those assumptions. The first part outlines 10 assumptions of the school role, which are based on the premise that the school is responsible for ensuring that students acquire basic living skills. In the second part, the five components of an alternative-high-school model are presented: student projects; curriculum/activities that meet students' affective needs; projects based on students' interests; trips that offer exposure to diversity; and individual guidance. The five components are not mutually exclusive. The recommended size of such a school or program is 30 to 50 students. (LMI)

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AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL MODEL: FIRST DRAFT

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AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL MODEL: FIRST DRAFT
DR. ROBERT LONDON

INTRODUCTION

This outline describes the initial direction of a collaborative project involving several educators with training and experience in alternative/progressive education. Our goals include: exploring and developing one or more new models for high school education, submitting articles concerning our work to appropriate publications, and implementing the model(s) in the creation of at least one school/program. This outline describes our initial assumptions concerning schooling and briefly indicates one example of a set of components of a school consistent with those assumptions.

ASSUMPTIONS

Initially, we are assuming that a school needs to:

1. Involve the students integrally with the life of the community in which the school is located.

2. Expose students to a variety of places, types of people and cultures.

3. Help students develop a strong connection with Nature.

4. Help students grow from dealing constructively with appropriate conflict situations.

5. Encourage students to explore and develop their interests.

6. Provide a curriculum emphasizing developing problem solving and coping skills versus emphasizing the acquisition of knowledge.

7. Facilitate students exploring affective issues central to their lives and the life of the school community.

8. Facilitate students becoming clearer about what their purpose in life is and how better to pursue that purpose.

9. Help students to effectively use modern technology (e.g., computers) as a tool to pursue interests, solve problems and function effectively.

10. Help students experience being effective change agents.

It is further assumed that a school consistent with the first ten assumptions would result in the student acquiring most, if not all, of the basic knowledge and skills necessary to function well in adult life. However, it is the school's role to monitor the student's acquisition of basic living skills and provide instruction in those skills not naturally mastered in that curriculum or elsewhere.

SAMPLE MODEL OF A SCHOOL CONSISTENT WITH THE ASSUMPTIONS

For purposes of simplification the sample curriculum and program will be divided into five components. For each component, the purpose and structure will be described, and some sample activities will be given. Hopefully, the descriptions of the components will give the reader a reasonably adequate sense of our direction.

1. Projects

Projects would be the primary vehicle to provide the student with a comprehensive education. The other components either supplement areas that typically would not be adequately covered by projects alone or insure that the individual student's progress is adequate in certain areas. For this component, each student would be involved in approximately four to seven major local projects. Each project would be community based and involve the student in actual ongoing work. Together the projects would: strengthen the student's connection with the local community; help the students see that certain types of efforts can result in positive changes; improve the students' understanding of a variety of important concepts in the major curricular areas; improve the student's problem solving and coping skills; increase the student's understanding of effective uses of technology; improve the student's ability to deal with conflict; and strengthen the student's connection with Nature. Consequently, each project needs to: give the student the opportunity to achieve a positive outcome in the community; allow the student to experience and deal with the conflicts that naturally arise; and emphasize improving problem solving skills and coping skills. In addition, each student's set of projects should include at least one: from each of the

major curricular areas; that directly improves the student's connection with Nature; and that requires the use of computers or other modern technology.

For example, a typical project might involve preserving and maintaining woods and park land in the town. This type of project would have two major emphases: maintaining and insuring good utilization of the already preserved lands in the town and identifying and attempting to preserve appropriate parcels of land not already preserved. The first emphasis would require the students to become familiar with the preserved land in the town and assume a role in maintaining or improving the health of the land, including better usage of the land (e.g.; nature hikes for elementary students). Of course, the more the analysis of the needs of the land and the initiative to improve the land comes from the students, the more consistent the project would be with the assumptions of the school. The second emphasis requires the student to use a variety of problem solving skills to identify the appropriate parcels of land for possible preservation. For example, the students would need to gather appropriate data, organize and analyze the data, make value decisions and draw conclusions. Finally, this type of project would be a major method to insure the student develops a strong connection with Nature.

Other typical projects might include: (a) assisting in the running of a business, (b) working in a nonprofit organization, (c) working in a historical organization, (c) participating in the developing of a cohousing project, or (d) involvement in some aspect of the running of the school.

2. Affective Component

Objectives from the affective domain need to be an integral component of each of the other four components. In addition, there needs to be a component of the curriculum which is primarily organized around objectives of the affective domain, and attempts to move the students to successively more consistent, healthy and effective ways of dealing with issues in the affective domain. This component needs to consist both of a planned curriculum and an opportunity for the students to deal with issues arising spontaneously. At this point it needs to be reiterated that affective objectives and issues will naturally play an integral role in each

component; this component recognizes that in today's society there is a pressing need for additional instruction and guidance in this area.

One format for this component is an adaptation of a common component of many alternative schools; that is, many alternative schools have three to five blocks of time a week for group counseling/discussion (e.g., one to three staff; eight to fifteen students in each group) and/or community meetings. The suggestion here is that approximately one block of time per day be allowed for this component. That time would be split between small group work and community meetings. The small group work would have three strands: (a) planned, systematic instruction in affective objectives with a focus on individual growth (e.g.; identity issues, value clarification, intimacy), (b) a sequence of cooperative group activities focusing on developing increasingly higher level skills for working effectively with others, and (c) time to discuss issues spontaneously arising. The community meetings would include both activities to improve the quality of the sense of community in the school and time to discuss school community concerns of a general nature.

3. Interests

In their discussion of a three-tier model for education, Weinstein and Fantini suggested that one of three emphases for a school should be the pursuit of interests. Hopefully, many of the other components would provide the student an opportunity to pursue his/her interests; in fact, if effective, many latent or new interests should be stimulated by the other components. This component recognizes the need to structure a way for the student to clarify and concentrate on pursuing what uniquely calls him/her.

The primary role in facilitating the student's pursuit of interests would be the individual counselor (see component five). Structurally, meetings at least weekly would seem appropriate. More importantly, the counselor needs to have command of a process to insure that the student really makes contact with what is <u>essentially</u> of interest to him/her. In addition, the school would include some minimum requirements for each student. For example, the Hammonasset School required a senior masterwork for each student. The student worked with a faculty adviser and an outside expert to complete a comprehensive project of interest. For example, projects included students who wrote and directed a play; built a cedar strip canoe; developed and taught a series of lessons on French for elementary

students; developed an exhibit of black and white photographs; built a fly rod and got expert instruction in using it; and organized a medieval banquet.

4. Trips

This component recognizes the need to directly expose each student to a diversity of places, people, cultures, etc. which the student would not normally be exposed to in the local community. Basically, two type of trips are suggested: trips which deepen the student's connection with Nature and trips that expose the students to a diversity of people and cultures. Of course, some trips would combine both types; e.g., a trip to an indigenous community in a rainforest. As much as is possible, trips would directly involve the students in the life of the place being visited. Trips would vary in length from one day to a month or more. The number of students involved in a trip would vary from one, to a small group, to the entire community. Structurally, it would seem appropriate to have provisions for both planned school times for trips (every student is involved in a trip) and trips for smaller groups with a specific interest.

Roughly, it would seem that approximately eight weeks over the course of a school year would be appropriate for trips. Presently, most alternative programs allow two to four weeks for trips; we believe a significant increase in this amount of time is a needed improvement in present models.

5. Individual Guidance

Each student would have an adviser. The major role of the adviser would be overseeing the program of the student and insuring that the student maintains a balance in his/her activities between pursuing interests, developing problem solving and coping skills in a variety of settings, mastering basic skills, becoming a participating member of the school community, developing a connection with the local community, developing a connection with Nature, and developing an understanding and appreciation of a variety of cultures.

One way the student's progress would be monitored is by the use of a curriculum grid. To be effective the curriculum grid would reflect the goals implied by the assumptions. A variety of techniques for evaluation consistent with the assumptions would have to be

developed. For example, a simple checklist may be adequate for monitoring certain basic skills expected to be mastered by all students. However, a narrative report would probably be necessary to monitor the student's process of clarifying his/her purpose in life. Obviously, the school would need to take adequate time to develop (and revise when appropriate) a grid that reflected the assumptions of the school.

Although the curriculum grid would be a major tool for the adviser to use, a more important factor would be the adviser's sense of the student's program and needs. The adviser needs to help the student find creative ways to insure that the student makes fullest use of his/her high school years, which would surely result in achievements far beyond what is needed to "satisfy" the curriculum grid.

Obviously, the adviser would need to meet with the student at least once a week. In addition, the adviser would need support from the school community to make his/her job feasible. For example, the school would need to have a selection of curriculum materials, etc. to make the role of the individual counselor in insuring the mastery of basic skills workable. In addition, each staff member might have the overall responsibility to monitor every student's progress in one portion of the curriculum. The counselor would need to meet with all these staff to get an overview of the student's progress. It would make sense that in most cases the counselor would also be in the student's group for the affective component of the program.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

It should be clear that the five components are not always separate. Two examples: (1) for the cooperative group work in the affective component, some of the activities might focus on cognitive objectives as well as the affective objectives related to working effectively with others. For example, there are a number of tasks in mathematics related to the concepts of area and volume which require mathematical problem solving skills and would also allow a focus on group dynamics. (2) The component of student interests could easily overlap with a number of the other components. In fact, if the program is successful, you would <u>expect</u> that there would be significant overlaps. For example, one of the projects might interest the student enough that he/she might want to extend the work of the project into an area he/she wishes to pursue further.

It would seem that a reasonable size for such a program to work effectively would be approximately 30 to 50 students versus the present size of between 75 to 150 of many effective alternative schools.

Of course, this outline ignores or only treats briefly many issues, both theoretical and practical, which need to be addressed before this model is ready for serious consideration for implementation. Hopefully, this outline has at least provided a fairly reasonable sense of our direction.